

SEATTLE DOWNTOWN PARKS AND PUBLIC SPACES TASK FORCE

TASK FORCE MEETING #10 SUMMARY: SEPTEMBER 9, 2005

Task Force Members

Ken Bounds, Co-chair
Kate Joncas, Co-chair (absent)
Catherine Stanford, Co-chair
Bruce Bentley (absent)
B. J. Brooks
David Brewster
Tina Bueche
Jordan Royer
Ron Sher

Parks & Rec/MID Staff

Dewey Potter
Eric Friedli
Kevin Bergsrud
Cheryl Fraser
Peggy Dreisinger
Greg Bucasas
Victoria Schoenberg
Christopher Williams
Anita Woo

Consultants

Bonnie Berk

Welcome and Announcements

Ken Bounds opened the meeting and welcomed attendees. He noted that he and B.J. had recently briefed the City Council's Parks Committee on the Task Force's work and received some comments and input. Committee members invited Task Force members to attend their next meeting, later this year.

Subcommittee Recommendations: Maintenance, Safety and Security

Christopher Williams and Peggy Dreisinger presented the conclusions of the Operations and Maintenance Subcommittee on maintenance, design and use, and safety and security. Christopher noted that there are 25 parks in downtown Seattle, comprising only 41 acres. Most cities have much more park acreage in downtown. Seattle's downtown parks are also older; there hasn't been a new downtown park since Freeway Park opened in the mid-1970's -- 30 years ago. The City's collection of small parks and limited acreage nonetheless presents numerous challenges. In all, the Parks Department has nine maintenance districts in the city, and maintenance downtown is provided at 2.5 times the level elsewhere in the city. The City spends about \$30,000 per developed acre in maintenance costs annually.

The current situation. City's parks are for everyone. However, downtown parks are generally not well used in the daytime and are ghost-towns after 5:00 p.m. Use of the parks is weighted toward homeless males, especially in the evenings. Regarding the feeding programs in the park for the homeless, these should be encouraged to move indoors, should operate only by permit, and the city's rules should be enforced. Homelessness is a societal problem, not just a challenge for the parks. The City and the County have a 10-year plan for the homeless and this plan needs to be understood.

People need reasons to go to a particular place, including a park, and there are not a lot of compelling reasons to visit the downtown parks. With the exception of Westlake Park, the parks lack proximity to downtown activity. Regarding safety and security, the comparative city analysis showed that cities with successful parks spend more money on park safety than on maintenance. This is a real differentiator among cities.

Finally, the Subcommittee learned that there are many stakeholders for the downtown parks – people who want to be involved with the parks, to make them better and to make a difference. These people should be cultivated and encouraged through park management approaches. The Subcommittee then presented its conclusions, noting that the recommendations tie together and operate as a system. Investing more in park improvements to replace old and worn out structures will likely result in a lower maintenance costs, for example.

Maintenance Recommendations: Task Force Discussion. Regarding the recommendation to repair the major fountains or replace them, the group asked for follow-up information on the fountains – which ones are not functioning and what is the likely cost of repair? The group also began discussing funding issues and options, with the agreement that this would be a major topic for upcoming meetings. One issue identified was the usefulness of working with the City's Department of Neighborhoods to tweak the matching fund. Use of the small sparks program could work well for the downtown parks. Finally, Ken Bounds summarized the major points made by the Subcommittee as follows: identify and support potential partners for specific parks; inspect the parks on a regular basis and involve neighbors and key stakeholders in those inspections; work with neighboring residents on park issues; and specify parks funding in the CIP.

Safety and Security Recommendations and Task Force Discussion. The Subcommittee noted that many of their recommendations are based on research about what works well in other cities. One interesting factoid: the City of Chicago has 60 police officers designated for its parks. In Seattle, there is a perception that the parks are not safe, and people need to be made to feel more comfortable about using the parks. There really needs to be an outreach and marketing effort, especially for those that live and work in areas surrounding the parks. The group discussed the Cal Anderson Park plan for security, and asked to review a copy of it.

Another issue stressed was the need to post a code of conduct clearly in each park. The police can then point to the signage and enforce what is posted. That makes it clearer and easier for everyone. And the City needs to be aggressive in its enforcement; to focus on illegal behavior so that citizens can come into the park and feel comfortable. Enhanced civility and respect is needed, and moral suasion to make that happen. The broken windows theory of policing and improvement applies to the city's parks – now they are places that don't get attention, and this needs to be changed, to improve their character and their use. Also, having "natural supervisors" in the park – people who work there and know the park and its patrons – that's invaluable for promoting safety and a sense of well-being. They are better than police officers! The group also discussed the park ambassadors. Perhaps they are not strong enough authority figures to provide safety and security. They tend to "look the other way," and that limits their usefulness. The concept that the parks should be safe 24/7 was emphasized by the Task Force. This will likely have funding impacts.

Character and Niches of Downtown Parks

The Task Force can to the following conclusions about the character of the remaining destination parks:

Hing Hay Park: a community and cultural gathering place for the International District and the city's Asian community. A place where Asian culture can be expressed and experienced. A quiet place for children, adults and seniors to commune.

The park could benefit from additional park activities. Key partners in this effort are the Community Action Partnership, the PDA, and the Advisory Council. The planned redevelopment of the Bush Hotel will also help improve the activity and vitality of this park.

South Lake Union Park: a large park with a maritime feeling. A place to celebrate the environment as well as hold cultural events.

The group also discussed adding three parks to the list of neighborhood parks: Denny Park, Plymouth Pillars (formerly Boren/Pike/Pine Park) and Cascade Park.

Denny Park: With the growth in downtown residential, Denny Park will become more of a place for neighborhood park activities. A challenge for this park is that the Park Department's Administrative Offices take up about one-quarter to a half of the park property. Ultimately, these offices may need to be relocated, to make room for the site to fully function as a park.

Plymouth Pillars is now being developed as a dog off-leash area, so its character will largely be affected by that use.

Cascade is already a great neighborhood, family-friendly park, and will continue to be so.

Additional Parks and Open Space in Downtown

The group discussed the very limited amount of park land in downtown, and the challenges of obtaining additional property. It is very expensive and comes with multiple challenges for the city. Still, its not impossible.

Another way to create the feeling of a park would be to implement strategies such as closing a street, say Second Avenue, on a Sunday. This is the kind of thing that happens in Boston, New York and elsewhere, and it is very successful. It should be considered in Seattle.

Key Focus Areas within Downtown's Destination Parks

The Task Force reviewed a preliminary matrix showing management actions needed for each of the destination parks. The group agreed that:

Six parks require focused management, most immediately: Occidental, Freeway, Steinbrueck, Westlake, Hing Hay and City Hall Park. The Task Force will focus specifically on these six parks in its upcoming discussions of parks management needs and recommendations. (It was noted that city staff are working on renaming City Hall Park.)

The future of Waterfront Park and Piers 62-63 is dependent on waterfront planning and their character will be defined by planning, design and construction of improvements to be determined. Therefore, their management needs are still to be determined, and addressed in a later phase.

South Lake Union was found to be well handled through the work of the Seattle Park Foundation, which is engaged in significant planning and improvement efforts at the site.

Whatever the Task Force recommends, it should have clear goals, be measurable and have mechanisms for accountability, the group also said.

Next Meetings

The next meetings are scheduled as follows:

Friday, September 23	8:00 a.m.
Friday, September 30	8:00 a.m.
Friday, October 14	8:00 a.m.